

2014

## The Signs We Speak: An exploration of the loss of precision and meaning in language today.

Emilie Finney  
*University of Central Florida*

 Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Finney, Emilie, "The Signs We Speak: An exploration of the loss of precision and meaning in language today." (2014). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 4704.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/4704>

THE WORDS WE SPEAK

AN EXPLORATION OF THE LOSS OF PRECISION AND MEANING IN LANGUAGE

TODAY.

by

EMILIE FINNEY

B.F.A., The University of Central Florida, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the School of Visual Arts and Design  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2014



© 2014 Emilie Finney

## **ABSTRACT**

My interest is in the beauty and power of language. I have sought to understand language on a systemic level. I have broken language down to alter signified meaning, exalted extinct words, mourned the loss of formal language, and explored the confines of common vernacular.

My artwork addresses meaning within the context of Semiotics and Linguistics. I have investigated the Semiotic theories and philosophies of Roland Barthes, Jacques Rancière, Pierre Guiraud, and Erving Goffman. As outlined by Roland Barthes, our language is a semiotic system used to communicate meaning. My work is also informed by the rules of Linguistics and the research of Linguists John McWhorter and Guy Deutcher. In my work I have consistently altered the signifiers within our language (words and letters) to affect meaning. I have also broken linguistic rules of syntax, word order, and word morphology (the arrangement of grammatical units), to obscure meaning. In my thesis work I have narrowed the focus of my artwork to exploring the loss of precision in language in popular culture today.

I have witnessed changes in language in our culture: changes in language itself and changes in attitudes toward language. Avenues such as the Internet, social media and texting have altered the language people use and have developed a more superficial type of communication. With a desire for ease of delivery and quickness, people have created and used acronyms and catch phrases to carry content. Thus they have created representations for themselves as well as developed a habit of using minimal content. As a result, people have divorced themselves from responsibility for full absorption and communication of information not only in their personal life, but also in their educational and professional life. My work addresses this lack of understanding and reveals the detriment of growing apathy toward clarity in understanding and conviction.

My progression to using sound as a medium was a result of my history and experience with music. Through examining the work of contributing artists in sound art, I found artists Laurie Anderson, Susan Philipsz, and Janet Cardiff among the most relevant to my practice. Musicians such as Philip Glass, John Cage and Trevor Wishart, inspired my creative approach as well as how I think about my work.

My exploration of sound is not only relevant to the way I work; it is relevant to the direction of the art world. The medium is growing as more museums, galleries and curators are including sound and new media within their spaces. As I continue to develop my artwork and practice, I look forward to what this medium has to offer.

Pour mon Papy Claude. Je dedis ce thèse à toi. Merci de m'avoir appris l'art du panier et merci de m'avoir appris la signification d'un travail bien fait. J'ai essayé de faire du bon travail et j'essera toujours. Merci. Tu me manques.

For my friends and family, without you, I would not be.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank my thesis committee for their support and guidance throughout this process: my thesis chair, Jo Anne Adams, and the rest of the committee, Mark Price, Theo Lotz and Keith Kovach.

I also receive unwavering support from my cohort, close friends, boyfriend and family. My life without the people I hold dear would be dark. I thank you all for your guidance and love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LINGUISTICS.....	10
SEMIOLOGY.....	16
MY SPHERE OF REFERENCE .....	23
CONCEPTUALLY THE WORK IS SOUND .....	24
APPENDIX: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION LETTERS .....	27
REFERENCES.....	31

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: By Author, <i>My expansive collection of teas reveals only part of my aeipathy with the drink; the rest is revealed through my blog which covers the entire history of my favorite teas complete with photos, descriptions of how the leaves are prepared, descriptions of the best ways to prepare tea based on location, water, altitude, and personal taste, as well as a page for all of my favorite kettles, and a page of links to Teavana, Mighty Leaf, and many more tea and tea paraphernalia companies. Also, if you know me, I tell you every day how much I love tea.</i> 2012, 30" x 20" .....	3
Figure 2: By Author, <i>The albedineity of the landscape reminded me of my first white Christmas.</i> 2012, 44" x 36" .....	4
Figure 3: By Author, <i>The artist's grasp of tint and shade aided his ability to mix the perfect canitude as the mid-tone for his grayscale image.</i> 2012, 44" x 36" .....	4
Figure 4: By Author, <i>Big Ben is claimed to hold the exact time; one can assume, therefore, that the crebrity of his ticks is invariant.</i> 2012, 30" x 20" .....	5
Figure 5: By Author, <i>The minute and cameranious nature of the space brought on a fully fledged, rush of paranoia as her claustrophobia kicked in.</i> 2012, 8' x 8' .....	5
Figure 6: By Ed Ruscha, <i>The Wrap-Up</i> , 1993, 40" x 72" .....	6
Figure 7: By Joseph Kosuth, <i>Neon Electrical Light English Glass Letters Yellow Eight</i> , .....	6
1965, 3 1/4 x 149 1/2 x 1 inches.....	6
Figure 8: By Lawrence Weiner, <i>A WALL BUILT TO FACE THE LAND &amp; THE WATER AT THE LEVEL OF THE SEA</i> , 2008 .....	7
Figure 9: By Gary Simmons, <i>Ace of Spades</i> , 2004, 84" x 84" .....	8
Figure 10: By Author, <i>Awesome</i> , 2012, 7" x 1.5" x 1" .....	11
Figure 11: By Author, <i>Awesome (Detail)</i> , 2012, 7" x 1.5" x 1" .....	11
Figure 12: By Author, <i>Synonyms</i> , 2012, Size Variable .....	12

Figure 13: By Ian Hamilton Finlay, <i>The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future Saint Just</i> .....	13
Figure 14: By Author, <i>The Star Spangled Banner</i> , 2013.....	15
Figure 15: By Author, <i>I Have a Dream</i> , 2013, 48" x 32" .....	17
Figure 16: By Author, <i>The Declaration of Independence</i> , 2013, 30" x 20" .....	17
Figure 17: By Author, <i>Lol</i> , 2013.....	18
Figure 18: By Author, <i>The Song of Creation</i> , 2013.....	19
Figure 19: Janet Cardiff, <i>The Forty Part Motet</i> , 2001 .....	20
Figure 20: By Author, <i>Votre Attention S'il Vous Plait</i> , 2014 .....	21
Figure 22: By Author, <i>I Have Something to Tell You</i> , 2014.....	22
Figure 21: I By Author, <i>I Take it Back</i> , 2014.....	22



## INTRODUCTION

*"Come, we shall have some fun now!" thought Alice. 'I'm glad they've begun asking riddles.--I believe I can guess that,' she added aloud.*

*'Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?' said the March Hare.*

*'Exactly so,' said Alice.*

*'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.*

*'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least--at least I mean what I say--that's the same thing, you know.'*

*'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"'*

*'You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, 'that "I like what I get" is the same thing as "I get what I like"'*

*'You might just as well say,' added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, 'that "I breathe when I sleep" is the same thing as "I sleep when I breathe"'*

*'It IS the same thing with you,' said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn't much."*

- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, *Lewis Carroll*

I was born into a bilingual and bicultural household and was fortunate to be able to visit France, my mother's country of origin, most summers. Through this experience I constantly compared the American and French cultures and languages.

Considering the differences between these two frames of reference is what catalyzed my investigation. The more I learned about French culture and the French language, the more I discovered how extreme some of these differences are. One major difference is how these two countries regard their language. L'Académie Française controls the official French dictionary and attempts to preserve French language and grammar. English does not have a defense committee in any country. Linguist John McWhorter in his book *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language*

*and Music* states, "...in 'real' (that is, oral) languages, as new words and meanings enter a language, they often ease old ones aside. And these old words, without the artifice of writing to preserve them, gradually vanish from communal memory instead of living on as useless synonyms (*lift* versus *raise*) or obscure alternates (*dipsomaniac*, which now has an air of Fitzgerald about it, versus *alcoholic*)," (McWhorter, 6). As words grow obsolete, they are removed from some dictionaries, seemingly erased from existence.

Throughout my schooling I read classic literature. The characters I met spent hours drafting letters to their friends and family, copying, editing and recopying their letters until they were perfectly worded and penned. The artful exclamations made by Cyrano de Bergerac and the biting lines of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy marked a formal era. Words were the tools people had to reveal to others their knowledge, wit and mind. I fell in love with the language in the classics. Compared to the language we find today, the older, formalistic diction seemed almost holy. As I continued to read John McWhorter, I found his opinion encapsulated what I was feeling:

"America no longer values carefully wrought oral expression in the way that it did even in the recent past...we marginalize the outer layers of our language's vocabulary. In this we risk essentially losing much of our language. Culture lives by the generation, and words that live only in the dictionary or on a word-a-day calendars are, in essence, dead," (McWhorter, 163).

The language I loved was gone. In response, I created works of art to immortalize extinct or obsolete English words. These artworks act as abstract representations of the words' definitions. To aid the viewer in discerning the meanings of these words, I titled my artworks in a statement that reveals their meanings within the context of that sentence. For example, "aeipathy" signifies an obsession or preoccupation with something. The piece I created for this word consists of a grid with the word "aeipathy" stenciled in graphite repeatedly across the horizontal lines of the background.

The foreground features the word, centered and stained with tea. Figures 1 through 5 comprise the series.

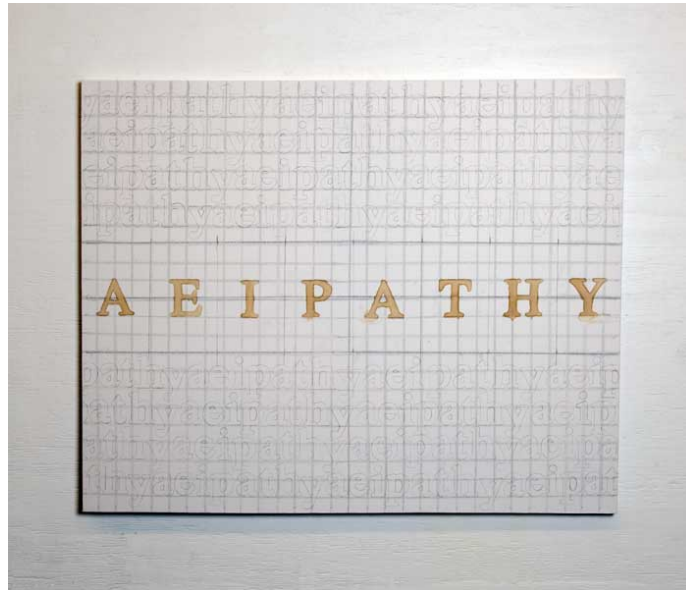


Figure 1: By Author, *My expansive collection of teas reveals only part of my aeipathy with the drink; the rest is revealed through my blog which covers the entire history of my favorite teas complete with photos, descriptions of how the leaves are prepared, descriptions of the best ways to prepare tea based on location, water, altitude, and personal taste, as well as a page for all of my favorite kettles, and a page of links to Teavana, Mighty Leaf, and many more tea and tea paraphernalia companies. Also, if you know me, I tell you every day how much I love tea.* 2012, 30" x 20"

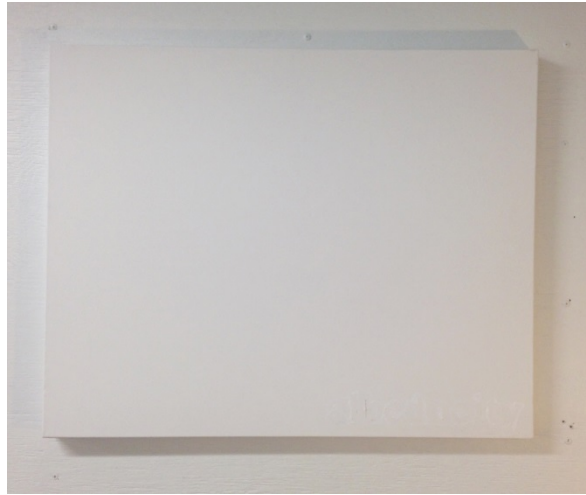


Figure 2: By Author, *The albedineity of the landscape reminded me of my first white Christmas*. 2012, 44" x 36"

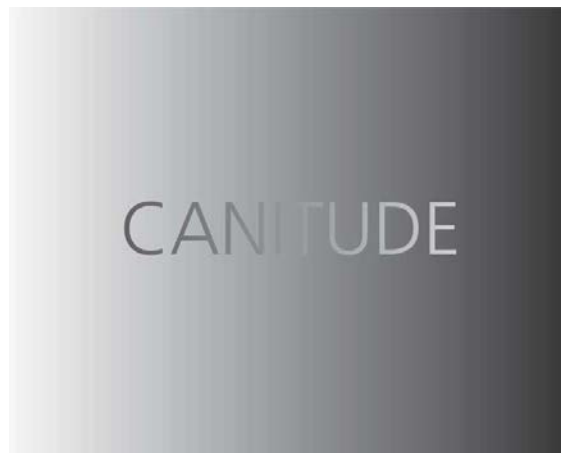


Figure 3: By Author, *The artist's grasp of tint and shade aided his ability to mix the perfect canitude as the mid-tone for his grayscale image*. 2012, 44" x 36"



Figure 4: By Author, *Big Ben is claimed to hold the exact time; one can assume, therefore, that the crebrity of his ticks is invariant.* 2012, 30" x 20"



Figure 5: By Author, *The minute and cameranious nature of the space brought on a fully fledged, rush of paranoia as her claustrophobia kicked in.* 2012, 8' x 8'

Influences on this series are artists Ed Ruscha, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Gary Simmons. Ed Ruscha's work usually has a simple foreground-background correlation. The text is in the foreground with either a color field or a hyper-realistic image in the background (Figure 6).



Figure 6: By Ed Ruscha, *The Wrap-Up*, 1993, 40" x 72"

Joseph Kosuth uses word associations to relay his message (Figure 7).



Figure 7: By Joseph Kosuth, *Neon Electrical Light English Glass Letters Yellow Eight*, 1965, 3 1/4 x 149 1/2 x 1 inches

Lawrence Weiner places his words directly on the wall. He uses the exhibition space to contextualize his compositions. By including symbols and marks within his compositions, he leads the eye through his pieces and the space (Figure 8).



Figure 8: By Lawrence Weiner, *A WALL BUILT TO FACE THE LAND & THE WATER AT THE LEVEL OF THE SEA*, 2008

Gary Simmons' work is expressive. He paints words on his canvases and then smears them with his fingers to create a ghost-like effect (Figure 9).



Figure 9: By Gary Simmons, *Ace of Spades*, 2004, 84" x 84"

Compositionally, I drew from Ed Ruscha and Lawrence Weiner. The movement Gary Simmons brings to his pieces inspired my piece depicting "crebrity." It shows evidence of my hand. In their works, these artists use irony. Ruscha's works include Hollywood inside jokes or references. As Simon Morley states in *Words on the Wall, Word and Image in Modern Art*, Ed Ruscha "demonstrate[s] a sensitivity to the ways in which writing visualizes speech...finding ways to bring the visual appearance of words into provocative confrontation with their ostensible content," (Morley, 135). Joseph Kosuth creates visual puns through his ironic arrangement of words. He also uses semiology to make the viewer question the true definition of a word. Kosuth is quoted saying, "Art is itself philosophy made concrete," and describing his goal as replacing "things" with "words...turning the viewer into a reader," (Morley, 145). Lawrence Weiner is also ironic and employs humor in his pieces. He uses text to lead the viewer through his thought process. His intent is to "renegotiate the nature of the transaction between the work and the audience." Weiner states that his work is "more open for the user...It lets consumers immediately transform it into something



they can use in their lives,'" (Morley, 142-143). Gary Simmons' work is serious or humorous with content geared primarily to an African American audience. In my pieces, my intent was to be honorific, not ironic. I wanted to use words that are no longer used, to immortalize them, and to teach the viewer the words' meanings.

I perceived a loss of formal language and lamented the fact that we use pre-composed language to "save ourselves time." McWhorter argues, "...our wariness of crafted language stems from a rejection of the challenge that it poses, out of a sense that we will benefit more from following our visceral inner muses." (McWhorter, 252). We do not take the time to choose our words, write a letter or compose a thought provoking essay. Instead we subscribe to thoughts, phrases and images that have pre-packaged connotations attached to them. These serve us in two ways: first, they afford us the time spent composing a message, and second, they allow us to be perceived in a certain way. We have not only conceded to laziness, but as a result, we have become imprecise with our expressions.

McWhorter's statements were extreme and disheartening. Upon further investigations, I came across the collaborative work of linguists Stefanie Jannedy, Robert Poletto, and Tracey L. Weldon, finding content that seemed to be personally addressed to me: "Often people view such change as a bad thing, so they try to resist it...Despite these social views toward change, linguists regard change as neither good nor bad; it is simply a fact of life and a fact of language." (Jannedy, Poletto, Weldon, 309). After reading this, I found my concern about laziness with language over reactive. Re-examining my purpose, I realized the clearer search underway in my work was a search for meaning.

## LINGUISTICS

Pierre Guiraud, a semiologist, said, "Dictionaries give us two definitions of the word *meaning*: 'idea which a sign represents' and 'idea to which the object of a thought can be referred'. There is the meaning of the word *life* and the meaning of 'life' itself: i.e. what 'life' means, what does it add up to, what does it mean?" (Guiraud, 40). As I discuss meaning, I will be considering the former definition.

Linguistically, meaning comes from words and morphemes--the smallest meaningful units in the grammar of a language--within their semantic structure (Parker, 29). Word choices, word relationships, words' contexts and word order play a role in determining meaning (Jannedy, 223-403). Words morph and change in dramatic ways, most often, broadening their definitions over time. Certain words grow to encompass multiple meanings, prolonging their existence in a language.

An example of one such word is "awesome." Today the original power and strength of the word is diminished. The weight of "inspiring an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, or fear; causing or inducing awe," is now a "weakened colloquial sense of 'impressive, very good,' " ("awesome" a; "awesome" b). A definition on Urban Dictionary says it bluntly, "Something Americans use to describe everything," ("awesome" c). Out of laziness, a need for ease, or lack of inspiration, we fall back on a common adjective rather than a nuanced one.

I researched the definitions and synonyms of the frequently occurring words "awesome," "good," "bad," "bitch," "cool," and "crazy." I then created a series of accordion books. Each overused word is cut out of the outside. Listed behind the holes are synonyms whose meanings are closer to the variations within the umbrella word. For example, behind "awesome," one can find words such as "eerie" and "glorious," which connote differing meanings (Figures 10-12).



Figure 10: By Author, *Awesome*, 2012, 7" x 1.5" x 1"



Figure 11: By Author, *Awesome (Detail)*, 2012, 7" x 1.5" x 1"



Figure 12: By Author, *Synonyms*, 2012, Size Variable

While creating this piece, I examined the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay, a poet and an artist, who focused on the poetry of words, not only in the literal sense, but also in their visual poetry. In his work, Finlay sought to fuse poetry and visual art into one unit, "No ideas but in things - Imagism,' he declared," (Morley, 161). Through his work, Finlay searched for the manifestation of meaning through visual form; something I sought to achieve in this piece. There is a garden in Scotland, Little Sparta, where visitors can stroll through his pieces placed throughout the space (Figure 13).



Figure 13: By Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future Saint Just*

Each of us speaks a dialect of a mother tongue. We employ various speech styles within different contexts and use language as an inclusive or exclusive tool. Linguistic researchers R.B. Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller refer to the behavior of including or excluding as "acts of identity," saying, "The individual creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behaviour (sic) so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he wishes to be identified, or so as to be unlike those from whom he wishes to be distinguished," (Page, 181). Thus language becomes an identifying tool we use to be perceived in a certain way.

Erving Goffman in his book *The Presentation of Self* argues that we are always performing. Every action we take and every speech act we make is part of an act to place ourselves in society. He cites Robert Ezra Park, author of *Race and Culture*,

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more

or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.

Guiraud posits, "One of the basic conditions of social life is knowing whom one is dealing with and, therefore, being able to recognize individual and group identity," (Guiraud, 85). As participants of society, we create an image of ourselves that is consistent within the demands of society. Guiraud continues, "The notion of *image* is one of the key concepts of our culture. Everybody has one: actors, politicians, women; and the least among us is concerned to maintain and not to compromise his image," (Guiraud, 99). Goffman says, "Thus, when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact than does his behavior as a whole," (Goffman, 35).

As our speech has simplified over time, what has it done to our image? I considered the possible impact the simplification of language could have on our literary accomplishments. One we all recognize is *The Star Spangled Banner*. The song acts as a powerful symbol of national pride in the United States. It represents greatness and triumph. I found the 250 most frequently spoken words in American English and rewrote our national anthem. I then filmed myself performing my altered rendition. By changing the words, word associations and contexts of the song, I affected the linguistic triggers that communicate meaning. The original grandeur of the song was lost. Because the melody, rhythm and some lyrics are the same, it is not until a viewer listens closely that he or she discovers that something is wrong. The original context of the song does not correspond to the changed words. By changing the language, I changed the meaning (Figure 14).

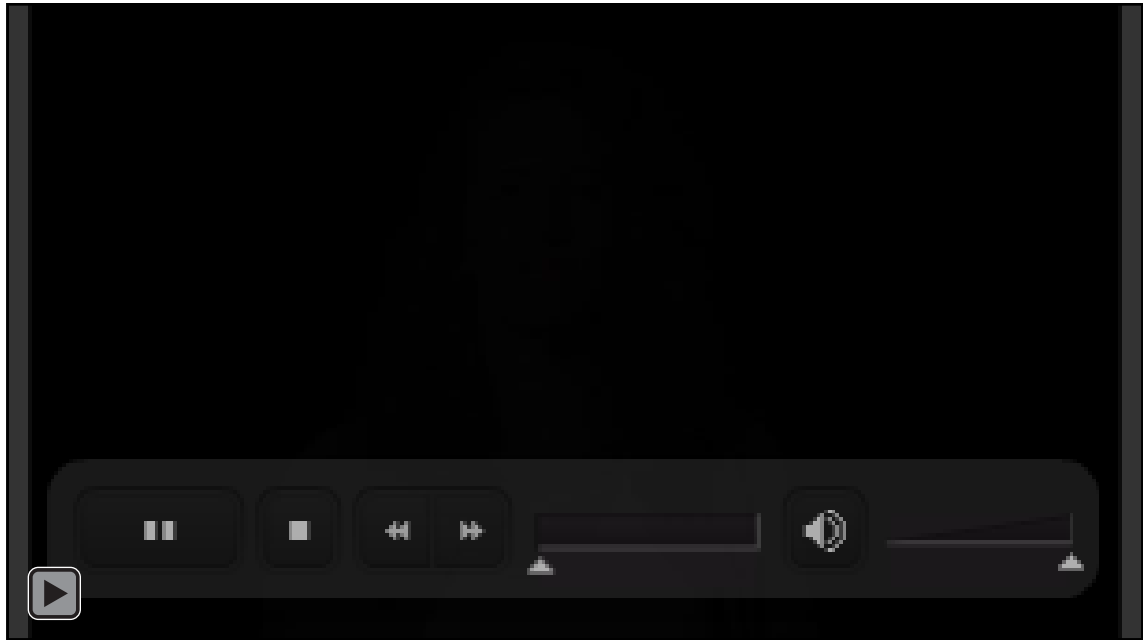


Figure 14: By Author, *The Star Spangled Banner*, 2013

This piece marks the moment I began to interfere with the system of language. I changed the intent, meaning, and interpretation of the song not only on a linguistic level, but also on a semiological level.

## SEMIOLOGY

Roland Barthes defines semiology as "a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content." (Barthes, 111). Because language is a system through which we communicate meaning, I will be considering it with a semiological lens. For a semiological system to express meaning, it must have three components: the signifier, the signified and the sign. (Barthes, 113). The signifier and signified work together to create a sign, or a specific meaning, which is then interpreted by those receiving the message. Pierre Guiraud claims that, "Linguistic communication is based on the use of articulated signs," (Guiraud, 49). Words and letters are signs which hold understood meanings and work together to deliver a unified meaning. As stated by Jacques Rancière in *The Future of the Image*, "Words describe what the eye might see or express what it will never see: they deliberately clarify or obscure an idea...there are images which consist wholly in words," (Rancière, 7). Along the same lines, Roland Barthes argues, "Language can only obliterate the concept if it hides it, or unmask it if it formulates it," (Barthes, 129).

Considering language in this way, I realized what I had done in my rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*; by changing the lyrics' role as message deliverers, I altered communication, as a result obscuring the true meaning of the song. I continued to make work in which words were no longer reliable signs. In my pieces *I Have a Dream* (Figure 15) and *The Declaration of Independence* (Figure 16) I altered the spellings of words in Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech and in the Declaration, rendering their messages difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

Normally letters are truthful signifiers that allow us to read a word and understand it as a sign. In these two works, I transformed once truthful signifiers into false ones. I replaced one letter with another until words were no longer discernible. The meaning of the texts is no longer



complete, deconstructing the original message. As viewers struggle to read the document, they try to decipher the changed words. Some will try to remember the original content and find that often, they do not remember what the true text says.

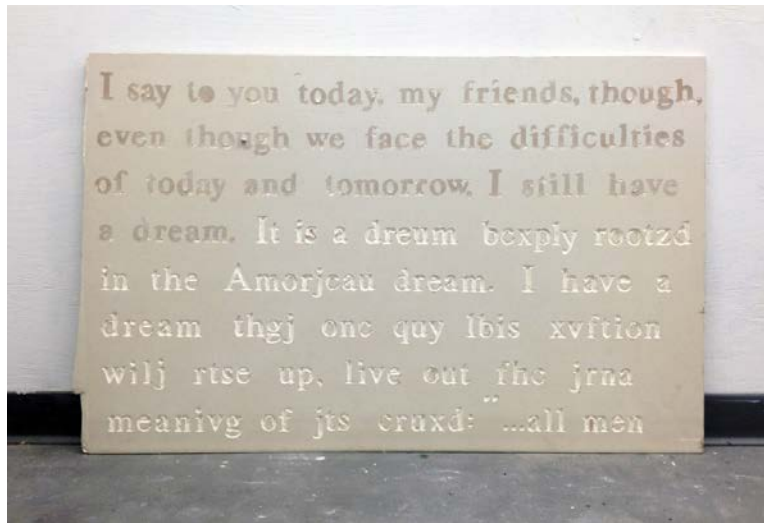


Figure 15: By Author, *I Have a Dream*, 2013, 48" x 32"

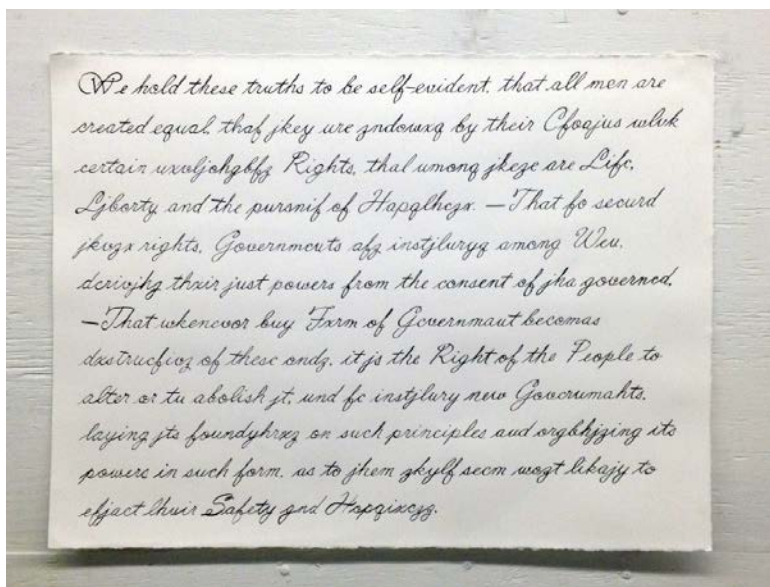


Figure 16: By Author, *The Declaration of Independence*, 2013, 30" x 20"

The response I received to my piece *The Star Spangled Banner* revealed how much sound could affect an audience. My concept and delivery worked in harmony and elicited an immediate emotional reaction from my audience. Although the confluence of video and sound worked, I preferred the power of sound.

Artist Laurie Anderson strings together spoken or sung narratives overlaid with sound effects and musical instruments in her performances. My first exploration with pure sound was inspired by her pacing and cadence. The piece, entitled *Lol*, became my stepping stone into sound. I focused on rhythm and tone, considering the piece a verbal, concrete poem (Figure 17).



Figure 17: By Author, *Lol*, 2013

I also discovered the work of Susan Philipsz, who creates sound installations to define, or redefine, spaces. The pieces that struck me were those in which she recorded only her voice, singing. Her delivery gives the melodies a haunting tone. Susan Philipsz' influence solidified my desire to continue working with my own voice.

After a few more exploratory pieces, I began my most recent vein of artwork. I recorded myself whispering the first three chapters of Genesis from The King James Holy Bible. I captured three recordings of each chapter and layered these recordings one atop the other. Due to the rhythm and diction of the piece, hearing every word from the narrative is impossible; only highly repeated words or phrases stand out. The energy of the piece changes with each chapter of Genesis. As the content changes pace, it becomes more percussive. The sharper sounds of the consonants are

repeated in a way that makes the words disappear. Syntax and semantics exist in the text; however, in my readings, they no longer contribute to meaning because the sound obscures most of the content. Instead, listeners must draw their own conclusions from the word associations or phrases they are able to discern (Figure 18).



Figure 18: By Author, *The Song of Creation*, 2013

I chose to whisper these readings to evoke the aura of the church. Whispering also implies intimacy or furtiveness which is a dynamic I sought to create. I did not want this piece to be construed as an attack on the Bible or Christianity, rather, I wanted to show how over time, we forget details of a story.

After discovering the work of Janet Cardiff, I considered delivering my sound work in a new way. Cardiff's piece *The Forty Part Motet* is an installation consisting of 40 speakers playing 40 parts sung by 40 people. The viewer can listen to individual parts, groupings of parts, or the entire composition depending on their position within the installation (Figure 19).



Figure 19: Janet Cardiff, *The Forty Part Motet*, 2001

In order to help my viewer experience my piece *Votre Attention S'il Vous Plait* in a similar way, I separated the sound tracks and played them through two speakers facing each other at the entrance of the gallery. My acoustic goal was to experiment with the space of sound within the audio itself and to explore volume. As defined by Caleb Kelly in his anthology *Sound*, volume is "distinct from noise, draws attention to our bodies, altering us to the phenomena of sound entering the body, slipping into our mouths, our nostrils and our ears," (Kelly, 16). The line between volume and noise was something I wanted to test. Conceptually the piece is not only about pressing into someone's personal space, but also about imitating the bombardment of messages we receive daily. Pop-up ads, sales calls, advertisements on television, emails, Facebook notifications and invitations all promise us important content that we must explore immediately. This piece speaks to the lack of personal content most messages have today. The viewers walk through a wall of sound that rings and

announces, "My I have your attention please," but never delivers a message. My intent was that part of their attention hovers, waiting for information that never comes (Figure 20).



Figure 20: By Author, *Votre Attention S'il Vous Plait*, 2014

In this next piece, I again focused on delivering a message devoid of content. Our routine interactions become a delivery of rehearsed lines. As we learned from Goffman and Guiraud, we create our image and uphold it. How many times in a day do we face this exchange?

"Hi. How are you?"

"I'm fine thanks, how are you?"

"Oh good, thanks. See you later."

"Have a good one."

I participate in this type of "conversation" multiple times a day. The intriguing part is that I could be having the worst day I have had in months, yet, I will still say, "I'm well, thanks."

*I Have Something to Tell You* is a reaction to our rehearsed exchanges. The piece repeats "I have something to tell you," "Listen," and "Can you hear me?" but never shares what is so pressing. The melody and rhythm set an easy pace, but the accompanying sound effects and exclamations give

a sense of tension and anxiety to the piece. Listeners may expect a message, but it is never divulged (Figure 22).

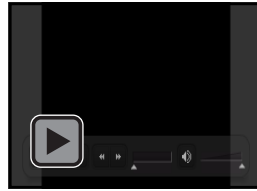


Figure 22: By Author, *I Have Something to Tell You*, 2014

Thinking about withheld content led me to consider its antonym, copious content. I remember learning as a child that once said, words can never be unspoken. This concept was powerful to me. The detriment of carelessness in speech is to say too much or state something that was not meant to be said. We all make this mistake and wish we could un-say something, but we cannot. For my piece *I Take it Back*, I explored pulling regrets back into my body (Figure 21).

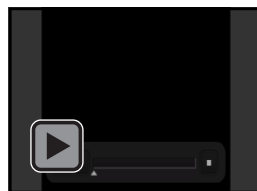


Figure 21: I By Author, *I Take it Back*, 2014

I recorded myself telling a personal story of behavior I regret. I included sounds I remember from the event. In the piece, I play the scene in reverse. Again I made our usual word-signs incomprehensible. The pacing makes the "words" sound like a different language, but they do not convey a clear spoken message.

## MY SPHERE OF REFERENCE

While creating my work, I consider rhythm, balance and movement within sound. I am influenced by my formal music education and singing *a cappella*. I listen to professional and collegiate a cappella music and am greatly inspired by the group Pentatonix. I have studied artists such as Imogen Heap and Bjork and have been exploring the works of musicians Philip Glass, Trevor Wishart and John Cage.

Philip Glass is considered a "minimalist." On his personal website, Glass' biography states, "Glass...preferred to speak of himself as a composer of 'music with repetitive structures.'" As it discusses Glass' compositions, it continues, "...to put it another way, it [Glass' music] immersed a listener in a sort of sonic weather that twists, turns, surrounds, develops," ("Philip Glass: Biography").

Trevor Wishart is an experimental musician who creates pieces that question "natural" sound. He blends recordings, instruments and the human voice to create what he calls "sound landscapes." He uses sound transformation as a "unifying principal for composing," ("Trevor Wishart").

John Cage's work is exemplary of the world of music as well as the art world. He composed "normal" sounding pieces but also experimented with chance, chaos and nature and was most famous for his piece *4'33"*, a piece in which the orchestra spends four minutes and thirty-three seconds not playing their instruments. Simon Morley wrote that "Cage emphasized silence over sound, the void over form, and non-sense over meaning." John Cage used sound to "challenge assumptions about art and the relationship of art to experience," (Morley, 118).

## CONCEPTUALLY THE WORK IS SOUND

In his anthology, *Sound*, Caleb Kelly describes the term "sound art:" "Within these texts sound art has been understood as a movement or a genre, distinct from other forms. The term itself is confusing, as it is used to describe gallery-based works as well as experimental music practices...'sound art' simply describes a medium," (Kelly, 14). This aligns with how I view the concept of "sound art." It is a medium I use to express my thoughts.

A thread that all art has in common is the notion of rhythm. Rhythm is the lifeline of my pieces in both my visual and audio work. Jacques Rancière writes, "The new common term of measurement, thus contrasted with the old one, is rhythm, the vital element of each material unbound atom which causes the image to pass into the word, the word into the brush-stroke, the brush-stroke into the vibration of light or motion," (Rancière, 44-45). I interpret Rancière's notion of "motion" to include motion within sound.

What draws me to sound is the power it carries. Luigi Russolo, one of the authors included in Kelly's anthology, writes in his essay *The Art of Noises*, "The loudest noises were neither intense nor prolonged nor varied. In fact, nature is normally silent, except for storms, hurricanes, avalanches, cascades and some exceptional telluric movements. This is why man was thoroughly amazed by the first *sounds* he obtained out of a hole in reeds or a stretched string..." (Kelly, 22). There is something disarming about sound. When we focus on listening, a new set of possibilities in experiences await.

John Hull wrote a book about the experience of living as a blind person. The blind's experience with sound is powerful, more so than those who can see. He says



The immediacy of the moment, or the lack of intermediate transitions, distinguishes the blind person's impression of space. The dominant feeling is that the world is full of perpetual motion and change. Sounds are dynamic and transient. They are soft at one moment, and then unexpectedly loud at another. They can lurk in the distance for a while, and then suddenly, brush against you. One can never predict their arrival or departure. Acoustic experience is, therefore, a whirlwind of unannounced change.

He continues, "...sound resides within one's existence and sustains it. Sighted people experience this envelopment all the time. Somehow it is less apparent to them than it is to blind people," (Copeland).

Most who think about and discuss sound agree that sound is about space. It defines, interrupts and creates space. What makes this powerful is that viewers imagine their own visuals. Darren Copeland wrote, "People can shape ideas about the world themselves just by listening to the associations triggered by sounds," (Copeland).

These thoughts speak to my feelings about sound. In my personal experience, sound is something I have always been attuned to. I spent my youth outdoors listening to the sounds around me. In choir and a cappella, I was aware of the sounds we were creating. The medium speaks to me. Sound enters my being and as I work with it, I get to experience it wholly.

One of the reasons sound is alluring to me is well stated by Ralph T. Coe in his essay *Breaking through the Sound Barrier*

One has to pay attention, for technically oriented art is realized in a province not meant for the lazy...sound is more difficult to approach than light which is seen. Our aesthetic ear is lazy compared to our eyes. The ear has less memory. Under normal conditions our lives are governed more by what we see than what we hear. Sight makes us tend to rely on the physical world much more than does

hearing. Conversely, the ear is more tuned to ideas, therefore less tied to the physical. It is potentially an ideal instrument of psychically oriented receptivity. "Therefore, if properly schooled, the ear could be a path into the beyond, since our eyes are restricted to the physicality of the universe,' (Kelly, 55).

I have found that working in this medium is an interesting way to approach the viewer. When discussing "visual art," people do not immediately think of "sound art." Working with it has allowed me to surprise my viewers. Caleb Kelly writes, "The belief that sound is a valid and critical factor in understanding contemporary art marks a shift from what is still called visual art - a term that suggests art engages exclusively with sight and visuality," (Kelly, 13). As more artists investigate sound as a medium, the art world is expanding the space lent to exhibit the artworks these artists create.

I have found that this medium has much to offer me and through me, much to offer my audience. As I continue to pursue this medium, I wish to hone my grasp of it and to focus my attentions on magnifying the poetry inherent in it.

## **APPENDIX: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION LETTERS**

3/7/2014

Re: Image Permission Inquiry - Emilie Finney

## Re: Image Permission Inquiry

Elizabeth Barlow Rogers [REDACTED]

Thu 3/6/2014 6:28 PM

To: Emilie Finney [REDACTED]

Dear Ms. Finney,

You have the approval of the FLS to use the image of the garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay for academic purposes.

Sincerely,

Betsy Rogers

On Thu, Mar 6, 2014 at 4:17 PM, Emilie Finney [REDACTED] wrote:

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Emilie Finney. I am pursuing an MFA at The University of Central Florida. I was hoping to use Ian Hamilton Finlay as a reference in my thesis paper which will be published electronically through the University.

May I have your approval to use an image I found on ArtStor of Little Sparta?

Thank you for your time. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Emilie Finney

Emilie Finney  
Graduate Assistant  
School of Visual Art and Design  
University of Central Florida  
[REDACTED]

--

Elizabeth Barlow Rogers  
President, Foundation for Landscape Studies  
[REDACTED]

<https://pod51038.outlook.com/owa/#viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&ItemID=AAMkADg3MWY2Mjk5LWYyYjU0NDhmNy04NDc0LTFlmMGYzNzk0ZGExMgBGAA...> 1/2

3/7/2014

Re: MFA Student Inquiring about Permission to Quote Your Wr... - Emilie Finney

## Re: MFA Student Inquiring about Permission to Quote Your Writing

John H McWhorter [REDACTED]

Thu 3/6/2014 4:56 PM

To: Emilie Finney [REDACTED]

Ms. Finney,

Feel free, and have fun writing.

Best,  
John McW

On Thursday, March 6, 2014, Emilie Finney [REDACTED] wrote:

Hello Professor McWhorter,

My name is Emilie Finney. I am pursuing an MFA at The University of Central Florida and was hoping to cite parts of your book *Doing Our Own Thing*, in my thesis paper which will be published electronically through the University.

May I have your approval to cite a few quotes from the text?

Thank you for your time. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Emilie Finney

Emilie Finney  
Graduate Assistant  
School of Visual Art and Design  
University of Central Florida  
[REDACTED]

<https://pod51038.outlook.com/owa/#viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&ItemID=AAMkADg3MWY2Mjk5LWYyYjUtNDhmNy04NDc0LTFmMGYzNzk0ZGEzMgBGAA...> 1/1

3/8/2014

Re: MFA student seeking permission to include image/video i... - Emilie Finney

## Re: MFA student seeking permission to include image/video in thesis

Zev Tiefenbach [REDACTED]

Fri 3/7/2014 10:03 PM

To: Emilie Finney [REDACTED]

Dear Emilie,

You may use images from the restricted area of our website:



Please be sure to properly credit and/or caption any images that you use.

Once your thesis is complete, please send a copy to my attention. We are working at improving our archive of academic research.

All the best,

zev tiefenbach  
cardiff/miller studio manager

On 2014-03-03, at 7:21 PM, Emilie Finney wrote:

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Emilie Finney. I am pursuing an MFA at The University of Central Florida. I am working with sound and Janet Cardiff's work has been an inspiration for me. I was hoping to include her piece *Forty Part Motet* as a reference in my thesis paper.

May I have your approval to use an image and/or video of the piece? If I am able to use a video, is there a copy I can save to my computer? My school requires that videos be embedded into our digital thesis document.

Thank you for your time,

Emilie Finney

Emilie Finney

<https://pod51038.outlook.com/owa/#viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&ItemID=AAMkADg3MWY2Mjk5LWYyYjUtNDhmNy04NDc0LTFmMGYzNzk0ZGEzMgBGAA...> 1/2

## REFERENCES

"awesome." (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 06 Feb. 2014.

<<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/awesome?s=t>>.

"awesome." (n.d.). *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. 06 Feb. 2014.

<<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/awesome?s=t>>.

"awesome." (n.d.). Def. 1. *UrbanDictionary.com*. Urban Dictionary, n.d. Web. 6 Mar.

2014. <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=awesome&page=2>>.

Barthes, Roland, and Annette Lavers. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.

Belli, Simone, Rom Harré, and Lupicinio Iniguez. "What Is Love? Discourse about Emotions in

Social Sciences." *Human Affairs* 20.3 (2010): 249-70. Print.

Copeland, Darren. "For an Awareness of Associations." *World Forum for Acoustic Ecology Online Reader*.

World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, 2 Mar. 2007. Web. 4 Jan. 2014.

<[http://wfae.proscenia.net/library/articles/copeland\\_associations.pdf](http://wfae.proscenia.net/library/articles/copeland_associations.pdf)>.

Deutscher, Guy. *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*. New

York: Metropolitan /Henry Holt and, 2010. Print.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: Univ. of Edinburgh, 1956.

Print.

Jannedy, Stefanie, Robert Poletto, and Tracey L. Weldon. *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to*

*Language & Linguistics*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1994. Print.

Le, Page R. B., and Andrée Tabouret-Keller. *Acts of Identity: Creole-based Approaches to Language and*

*Ethnicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. 181. Print.

Morley, Simon. *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California,

2003. Print.

Parker, Frank. *Linguistics for Non-linguists*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1986. 29. Print.

"Philip Glass: Biography." *Philip Glass: Biography*. Dunvagen Music Pulishers, n.d. Web. 07

Mar. 2014. <<http://www.philipglass.com/bio.php>>.

Pollack, Barbara. "Now Hear This." *ARTnews* 112.10 (2013): 86-91. Print.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso, 2007. Print.

"Trevor Wishart." *Trevor Wishart*. Trevor Wishart, n.d. Web. 07 Mar. 2014.

<<http://www.trevorwishart.co.uk/audfull.html>>.

Images:

Anderson, Laurie. *Songs & Stories from Moby Dick*. 1999. Performed at Brooklyn Academy of

Music, Next Wave Festival, October 1999. *Artstor.org*. ArtStor. Web. 6 Mar. 2014.

Cardiff, Janet. *Forty Part Motet*. 2001. Myoung-Rae Park (Platform Seoul Installation



2008). *Artstor.org*. ArtStor. Web. 6 Mar. 2014.

Finlay, Ian H. *Little Sparta (General View)*. N.d. Foundation for Landscape Studies, Scotland. *Artstor.org*. ArtStor. Web. 6 Mar. 2014.

Kosuth, Joseph. *Neon Electrical Light English Glass Letters Yellow Eight*. 1965. Exhibited at Sperone Westwater, Fall 2009. *Artstor.org*. ArtStor. Web. 6 Mar. 2014.

Simmons, Gary. *Ace of Spades*. 2004. Metro Pictures. *Artstor.org*. ArtStor. Web. 6 Mar. 2014.

Weiner, Lawrence. *A WALL BUILT TO FACE THE LAND & THE WATER AT THE LEVEL OF THE SEA*. 2008. Exhibited at Marian Goodman Gallery, Winter 2009. *Artstor.org*. ArtStor. Web. 6 Mar. 2014.